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# The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those  
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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## A DISSERTATION ON DIALECT

**A**LTHOUGH dialect has been nominally under the editorial ban for years, it must be evident to students who follow magazine literature that certain forms of dialect have a wide and increasing acceptance at the present time. This might be regarded merely as proof that editorial styles change, but fundamentally it has deeper significance.

It will be admitted that the dialect stories of today are not a revival of those in favor fifteen or twenty years ago, when it was unusual to find a magazine that did not contain at least one piece of fiction featuring New England dialect and another narrated in typical negro accent.

These have had their day and, in one sense, are nearly obsolete. That is to say, the story using negro dialect, for example, stands little chance of being published just because it is a clever exposition of that dialect. If it has some other distinctive feature, it may be published in spite of that dialect. And still another exception may be made, broadly covering all forms of dialect in fictional usage a few years ago. Certain authors, who have built up their following with such tales, are still sure of their markets; but a new writer, employing the old dialect perhaps equally well, seldom finds acceptance for his tales.

Yet stories told in some of the newer forms of dialect undoubtedly win publication because of the dialect more than for anything else. The yarns of Ring W. Lardner, for example, have little to distinguish them in the way of plot. They are published mainly because the dialect has struck the popular fancy.

To the student-writer who has just received the advice, "Don't write dialect stories," it is somewhat bewildering to pick up a leading magazine and find in its table of contents a Montague Glass "Potash and Perlmutter" story in Yiddish dialect, an H. C. Witwer baseball dialect story, and a Ring W. Lardner "Friend Al" tale also in what may, for lack of a better term, be called baseball dialect.

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As a matter of fact, the advice against writing dialect is sound. Such forms of dialect as New England, Southern, Western, negro, Bowery, and most of the foreign perversions of English, are not desired—at least from new writers—because they already have been brought by other writers to a point where it is difficult to improve upon them, and their novelty has passed. On the other hand, writers who enter into competition with those who have popularized the distinctive forms of dialect now frequently appearing under well-known names are sure to be regarded as imitators.

This leaves us small opportunity to succeed along the line of dialect fiction. Our efforts will be condemned either on the ground that they are hackneyed or that they are plagiarisms. And to avoid such pitfalls by *inventing* a new dialect is hardly practicable, since the appeal of dialect fiction lies in its reproduction of a corrupt form of speech in actual use.

The one thing left is for the writer to *discover* a dialect—a corruption of the King's English already in existence. He who makes such a discovery sets his feet on the road to fame and prosperity.

At first thought, the task appears rather hopeless, for it would seem that any dialect which meets the requirements by being familiar to the ears of readers must likewise have been captured. Nevertheless, a writer who possesses what might be termed an "ear" for dialect may discover fields wholly untilled. For example, the theatrical boarding-house stories of Helen Green Van Campen owed much of their appeal to the stage localisms which she reproduced more effectively than her predecessors. Another writer discovered that the New York shopgirl speaks a dialect all her own. The work of Ring W. Lardner already has been instanced. When he reproduced the typical baseball-player's dialect on paper, readers everywhere recognized it, although from talking with scattered members of the profession few of us would have discovered it for ourselves.

Dialect, like language as a whole, is a plant of slow growth. In early days there was no such thing as Western cowboy dialect. The pioneer Western settlers and cowboys came from all sections of this and other countries. They had no common form of speech. The New England twang mingled with the mountain accent of the Ozarks, and these with the French-Canadian patois and the English cockney localisms. Gradually their various tongues were amalgamated. Certain idioms and pronunciations became fixed, so that, hearing them, we at once knew the speaker to be a Westerner. But not until fiction-writers caught this accent did we begin to realize that it was typical.

New dialects not improbably are growing up among us at the present time, for dialect is a resultant of the various forms of speech

prevailing among alien persons who come together, plus local conditions. Undoubtedly a typical soldiers' dialect will result from the congregating of thousands in the army training camps and trenches. Some discerning writer will discover this dialect and when he reproduces it we shall recognize it, although its earmarks will not have been apparent until they were called to our attention.

The need of a typical dialect to give local color to tales written in the army setting is already felt by editors. With nothing better at hand, they have called upon the dialect writers of today, Ring W. Lardner, H. C. Witwer and others, and set them to writing tales of the trenches. The result is not altogether satisfactory, but it helps to "fill in," pending the development of a distinctive army man's lingo.

In this, no actual inconsistency has resulted, since the writers in question have merely taken their baseball characters, dressed them in khaki, and allowed them to tell in their accustomed vernacular of events which transpire in the cantonments and on the battle-lines. Those who have followed Ring W. Lardner's typical hero through the vicissitudes of professional baseball life naturally are entertained by his characteristic comments on life among the rookies.

Anyone looking for inconsistencies, however, can find many in dialect stories of the day. For an example, turn to H. C. Witwer's narratives in letter form, such as "From Baseball to Boches," in a recent issue of Collier's. The story begins:

Vivela, France.

Dear Joe: No doubt you will be surprised to see that we ain't in Berlin yet, and here we been in Europe over a month. Well, Joe, it ain't because the U. S. Army is stallin' around shootin' crap or nothin' like that—we're busier than a guy with St. Vitus's dance tryin' out a pair of roller skates. They ain't a minute that we ain't bein' showed a new way to commit felonious assault on them Germans, and we now know how to kill 'em practically all the up-to-date ways, except by mailin' 'em poison ivy, maybe, or somethin' like that.

Note that this is a story told in the first person, supposedly by letters from Ed Harmon, "ex-Czar of the ball park," to his friend Joe. The absurdity of picturing Ed as meticulously putting in an apostrophe every time he comes to a word which he would pronounce by dropping the final "g" hardly needs mention.

No doubt Ed would *pronounce* "shooting" as if it were spelled "shootin'," and "them" as if it were spelled "'em," but it is certain that, in a letter, he would, if sufficiently educated, *spell* the words exactly as anyone else would spell them, with the final "ing" and the preliminary "th." Or, if he labored under the impression—a far-fetched assumption—that the spellings coincided with his accent, he would spell the words phonetically, "shootin" and "em," without the apostrophes.

The English cockney may misplace his "h's," but that is a linguistic difficulty and he probably—if he knew how—would spell

words in the conventional manner. A colored man whose tongue insisted on rendering a phrase "Down in de co'n fiel'," would be more likely to write it "Down in the cornfield" than otherwise.

Several of these Witwer stories in letter form have bristled with clipped words, just as they might have been spoken by the character, the missing letters being carefully indicated by apostrophes—the last things a writer of illiterate tendencies inserts, even where necessary to indicate the possessive.

Ring W. Lardner is more careful—or else he has fallen into the hands of more consistent editors. He manages to secure the effect of illiteracy in letter-form stories by naive transpositions of sentence structure, misspelled words, and similar convincing features.

To sum up:

Dialect stories, in order to gain acceptance, must conform to certain limitations:

(a) The dialect must be new.

(b) It must be a corruption of speech that is in general use.

(c) And even so, it is likely to make its way slowly into public favor. A writer of Southern tales who is sufficiently well known in several leading editorial offices to have attracted many interested letters from the editors has discovered subtle variations in negro dialect which make his stories original and convincing in that respect. He has discovered also a dialect prevalent among children in certain sections of the South which has aroused the interest of editors although it has not as yet moved them to the point of acceptance. Their caution, probably, is partly due to a doubt whether the general public will recognize the localisms.

Ring W. Lardner first sounded out the public with his baseball dialect through the newspapers. It was some time before magazine editors fell into line.

No hard and fast rule for "breaking in" with dialect stories can be given. The writer, however, who actually discovers a new and widely prevalent variant of the current speech—something characteristic and distinct—possesses a potential gold mine. His characterization is likely to be good, because one who has a keen ear for localisms is also pretty sure to be sensitive to other phases of characterization—and he need not worry much about plot. If the dialect is sufficiently clever—once it has won its way—it will carry the stories largely by itself.

—W. E. H.

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## LETTERS WITH MANUSCRIPTS

YOUNG writers often ask for information upon the advisability of inclosing letters with manuscripts submitted for editorial consideration. As a rule, a letter is not necessary. A stamped and addressed envelope for return of the manuscript is sufficient, although many make a practice in addition of placing the legend, "Submitted at usual rates," on the manuscript. If a letter accompanies the manuscript, the simpler the better, usually.

But after all, placing manuscripts is only a form of salesmanship, and the original salesman frequently secures first consideration from a customer, even though the final question resolves itself into one of the goods and their quality. If a writer can strike just the right note in letters accompanying a manuscript, he may succeed in putting himself on terms of easy familiarity with the editor. The danger is in overdoing the matter and of giving the manuscript a black eye by seeming too "fresh."

Albert William Stone, who recently contributed an interesting account of his "first-draft" method of preparing manuscripts, has a few pertinent experiences along this line to relate. His stationery carries out the idea, containing in the upper right-hand corner, opposite his name and address, the suggestive legend, "A word of criticism may constitute a whole volume of encouragement." On the subject of inclosing letters with manuscripts, Mr. Stone writes:

I want to make a suggestion with reference to letters sent with manuscripts. Most writers advise against them, saying that the story or article will always do its own pleading.

My experience has been different. Here is an instance: About a year and a half ago I sent a story to the *Argosy*, addressing it personally to Matthew White, Jr. I also sent him a letter which seemed to me at the time rather reckless in its phraseology, since I kidded him to the limit.

"I'm getting tired of monkeying with unappreciative editors," I said, in substance. "I can be pushed just so far, as Cousin Egbert says. First thing you know I'll get disgusted and quit sending you anything."

In reply I got a letter signed by White himself.

"If your story were as clever as your letter, I should be delighted to send you a check therefor," he said. "As it is, I like the convenient length, and the Western atmosphere. If these hints are of any avail to you, go to it."

To which I retorted:

"If the letter was so all-fired clever, why didn't you send me a check for it? You kept it, didn't you?"

Another time he wrote me, in connection with a rejection:

"Just to show you that there is no hard feeling, I will quote verbatim what the reader said about your story. 'There is nothing to this that

hasn't been done many times before,' his report says. 'I guessed the outcome long before I came to it. Besides, going back on one's pal doesn't reform him.' So you see, I didn't act on prejudice in rejecting your yarn."

And I replied:

"That reader has too much perspicacity. If I were you I'd fire him and get some good-natured cuss who'd take pity on struggling authors. Just think how popular such a move would be with your army of would-be contributors."

To Mr. Davis I always address a kidding letter. If he dislikes it, he certainly doesn't hesitate to come back at me strong.

"I didn't like the position you gave my story in your magazine," I said once. "It was the very last one in the book. My friends tell me that I came pretty near not being in it at all."

"Don't let 'em kid you!" he came back at me. "Get in any way you can—by the front door, back door, porch climbing or blasting your way in with dynamite. For instance, your last story felled me for \$40—if you'll just make such-and-such a change." Etc.

I once wrote the editor of Everybody's after trying in vain to sell him some anecdotes for his "Chestnut Tree" department, that my patience was almost at an end.

"This thing is going too far," I wrote. "I'll give you this one more chance. If you turn me down this time, I shall proceed to make myself famous through some other magazine. Then, no matter how hard you beg, you'll get nothing from me. It takes a lot to make me mad, but when I'm roused, I'm a dangerous man."

And old, conservative Everybody's came out of its editorial shell long enough to write:

"Send us some stuff that wasn't originated in the Ark. I admit that we print some real chestnuts; but yours are petrified beyond all resemblance to their original form. Dig up something new, please, before you put your awful threat into execution. We'd like one more chance, anyway."

Short Stories haven't sent me a rejection slip since I began writing the editor kidding letters. Harry Maule seems to delight in replying in kind. He has made several suggestions as to the kind of material he would like to see from my pen; but it keeps me busy pestering Mr. Davis. Usually if he turns it down I know that Mr. Maule would follow suit.

The editors don't want long-winded explanations, or letters begging for recognition. But I do believe that a light-vein epistle is welcomed by them. Don't you? It attracts their attention, at any rate; and that's what you've got to do to sell.

ALBERT WILLIAM STONE.

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### Subjects Treated to Date:

1917	
JANUARY.	The Business of Writing. The Reporter's Creed—Simplicity. Breaking Into the Magazines. Poetry and Rimery.
FEBRUARY.	The "Big" Story. The Lesson of the Hitching Post. Poetry and Rimery.
MARCH.	Mastering the Vocabulary. Versifying for Practice. The Story With a Purpose. The Dwindling News Story.
APRIL.	Outgrowing Criticism. Habits That Go in Pairs. Stories and Morals. Poetry and Rimery. Sad Endings.
MAY.	Mechanical Principles of Creative Writing. Dramatizing Fiction.
JUNE.	Web-Work Plot Structure. (Illustrated with diagrams.)
JULY.	Web-Work Plot Structure. (Continued.)
AUGUST.	The Free Training School for Writers. Web-Work Plot Structure. (Concluded.)
SEPTEMBER.	The Essay—Substance and Form. Write the First Page Last.
OCTOBER.	The Fickle Jade Inspiration.
NOVEMBER.	An Inspiration Symposium. (Including contributions from Arthur Preston Hankins, William MacLeod Raine, Hapsburg Liebe, Gertrude MacNulty Stevens and William Sanford.)
DECEMBER.	An Inspiration Symposium—Second Installment. (Including contributions from Robert Ames Bennet, Frederick J. Jackson, Junius B. Smith, Thane Miller Jones, Edwin Baird and Celia Baldwin Whitehead.)
1918	
JANUARY.	An Inspiration Symposium—Third Installment. (Including contributions from J. Frank Davis, William Merriam Rouse, Harry Stephen Keeler and Kathlyn Leiser Robbins.)
FEBRUARY.	An Inspiration Symposium—Fourth Installment. (Including contributions from Kathrene and Robert Pinkerton, William H. Hamby, E. E. Harriman, William H. Kofoed, Chauncey Thomas and Alexander Hull.)
MARCH.	That Elusive Something—Punch. The Inspiration Symposium—Aftermath. (Including a contribution by Dell H. Munger.)
APRIL.	Constructive Punch.
MAY.	Clean Copy.
JUNE.	The Opening Punch.

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W. J. L.

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